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*...Since 1994, when the equity lawsuit was filed, there have been changes in the funding for low wealth school districts: i.e., Robeson County has already seen positive results from the lawsuit.*

# Savage Inequalities in Robeson County Schools, NC

**Enid B. Jones and Mary Chavis**

## Introduction

This paper is being used to report on an exploratory study on intradistrict distributions of resources in elementary schools in a low wealth county/district in North Carolina. The study was designed to discern the way resources are distributed at the school level, to determine how the community perceived the resources available to elementary students in different parts of the county/district, and to judge perceived inequities that could affect the achievement level of the student based on the place of residence in the county. Interest was developed in the issue because of several editorials in the local newspaper, as well as, because of the implementation of the new accountability evaluation model by the state department of education.

## Background on North Carolina

The current education program in North Carolina is based on the new ABCs Plan which was developed by the state board of education in response to direction from the 1995 General Assembly to focus more on basic subjects, efficiency and better local control over educational decisions (The New ABCs, 1995). Implementation of the plan began in 1996-97 school year for grades K-8 where reading, writing, and mathematics were monitored. Under this program, individual schools are held accountable for student performance, and staff in each school must take responsibility for the education of each student. In each case a year's worth of growth for a year's worth of schooling will be expected. School growth is the expected growth rate for that school based on previous performance statewide. All schools achieving performance standards will have the opportunity to receive incentive awards which will be allocated based on the number of certified staff at the school. Those schools that do not meet their expected growth standard and are low performing will receive assistance. If assistance efforts do not result in improvement, intervention through the replacement of the principal and loss of jobs for teachers, or school board take-over of the school could occur—the latter would be a last resort strategy.

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Prior to action taken under the ABCs plan to address intra-district inequity and inadequacy (though the latter might have been unintentional) as a result of the 1996-97 end-of-grade tests, a mostly traditional method of school finance and governance was used. Education finance plans and strategies were centered mainly around inter-district inequities. Intra-district inequities and variations were rarely examined for horizontal or vertical equity compliance. However, as Stiefel, Rubenstein, and Berne (1998) put it, with increasing interest in schools as centers of management and budgeting authority, more attention is being given to resource allocation at the school rather than the district level.

The Public School Forum of North Carolina (1997) found that in North Carolina low wealth supplemental funding helped to close the spending gap, but only slightly. There was a significant discrepancy between end-of-grade and end-of-course testing for grades 3-8 reading, and mathematics. The percentage of students at or above grade level in reading and mathematics was 71% and 72% in the state's top 10 spending counties, and 57% and 58% in the bottom 10 spending counties. The Forum concluded that the state needs to develop a comprehensive system of school finance that connects funding to the state's standards and goals for student outcomes. In a recent article in a local newspaper (Jones, 1998, February 20), the Forum is quoted as saying that the secret to a turnaround that occurred in low performing schools in poor districts between 1996-97 and 1997-98 was money. The additional expertise and manpower that came with the intervention assistance teams were seen as just the kinds of things poor school systems say they cannot afford.

## Literature Review

The emphasis in education finance has shifted from the traditional cry of equal funding to include the concept of adequacy while ensuring equity. A major inequity in school funding according to Burrup, Brimley and Garfield (1996) is the difference in quantity and quality of services provided in the country's thousands of school districts. Usually such discrepancies are seen as occurring between districts, but the level of awareness of these differences within districts was raised as far back as 1971 in the Washington, DC case *Hobsen v. Hanson*, in 1974 in an equity lawsuit, in New York in the case *School Board of Education, Levittown v. Nyquist*, in 1971 and as recently as 1991 in *Abbott v. Burke* in New Jersey, as well as in 1994 in North Carolina in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*. Intra-district inequities have taken on new life in the light of the accountability models being developed by state education departments to evaluate students, teachers, principals and in fact entire school systems.

Equity is defined in educational finance literature as the state, ideal, or quality of being just, impartial and fair. (Swanson & King, 1997; Odden & Picus, 1992, and others). The distinction is often made between horizontal and vertical equity, both of which if achieved concurrently would create the ideal funding situation. Adequacy on the other hand can be seen as the provision of resources in sufficient amounts to achieve stated education goals. This view of adequacy is supported by Burrup, Brimley and Garfield (1996) who point out that one danger of the accountability movement is that taxpayers may expect the schools to be accountable, at the same time ignoring their own responsibility for providing adequate funds for achieving the comprehensive goals of education.

Since individual schools do not have revenue raising responsibilities or individual tax bases on which to draw, a new set of equal opportunity issues have become important at the school level. These might include relationships between resources and student characteristics, or between resources and a school's geographic location within a district, and between distribution of resources and students' race or ethnicity. (Stiefel, et al 1998). A student's socio-economic status may well be a factor to consider if it is a symptom of several other factors affecting the student's performance. Further, no debate on adequacy can take place without reference to the impact of the courts, the degree of poverty, race/ethnicity, or ruralism and their concomitant problems.

#### *The Courts and Equity*

Relief has been sought for school inequity in both legislative and judicial systems. Elementary and secondary schools are in a funding crisis as gross disparities exist in per pupil expenditure because the funding of these schools relies on local property tax revenues. School systems have turned increasingly to the courts to help solve the funding inequities (Colwell, 1998). The courts have challenged school equity since the early 1970s and since then over 70% of the states have been advised that their methods of funding do not meet legal standards for the delivery of instructional services to the children of poor school districts. (Firestone, Goertz, & Natriello, 1997). In fact the quality of educational instruction and facilities, increasing property taxes, lack of state financing for mandated programs and the reduction of state funding to local school districts are currently topics of political debate. Robeson county is one of five school districts who are plaintiffs in an equity law suit in North Carolina. These school systems allege that children in their poor school districts are not receiving a sufficient education to meet the minimal standard for a constitutionally adequate education. (*Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, 1997). This same suit includes five plaintiff-intervenors who are seeking additional funds for urban areas within the districts.

#### *Poverty*

Poverty is addressed in the literature on inter-district inequity but can also be addressed in intra-district analysis as well. Woolf (1980) saw poverty as the state in which one lacks a usual socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions and poverty-stricken means very poor or destitute. The impact of poverty on school outcomes is well documented. Children from poor families tend to have lower than average achievement and higher than average dropout rates according to a report on children poverty (Children and poverty, 1998). There is a strong relationship between low family income during the preschool and early years and completion of high school. Children living below the poverty level are more likely than non-poor children to be classified as "learning disabled" or "development delayed." A difference of 6- to 13- points in I. Q. score was present in many poor children even when controlled for maternal age, material status, education and ethnicity (Children and poverty, 1998).

Further, it costs more to educate children with special needs as they do not have the same opportunity to equal education as their normal peers because their readiness skills are impaired (Verstegen, 1998). Hence, it could well cost more to educate children in schools located in poor neighborhoods than those in schools in wealthier neighborhoods within the same district. In recognition of this the federal government provides additional funds through Title I of the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act to school districts based on the number of poor children they serve (ESEA, 1994). Much of the funds are used to provide additional educational services to low achieving students.

#### *Ruralism*

Another factor to be considered in intra-district analysis is the extent to which some areas are more rural than others. Rural areas have many problems not faced by more metropolitan areas. Twenty five percent of American children in rural areas live below the poverty level. Their academic achievement is below that of children living in other areas and the school buildings tend to be older. This situation is recognized by the federal government as evidenced by the provision of grant funds by the federal government to help schools located rural areas for financial assistance, restructuring of rural schools and to support telecommunication technologies in these areas.(ESEA, 1994).

The distressed economic situation in rural areas is particularly difficult when recruiting teachers as they want to avoid professional isolation that can occur in such areas- this is less likely now with modern technology. Also, because of the low economic status buildings tend to be substandard, but there are also the problems formerly associated with large cities such as increased drug abuse and violence. As Butler (1991) states, by almost every measure, rural residents are disadvantaged when compared with their urban residents. In 1991 the U.S. Department of Commerce reported that the rural poverty rate had increased to 16.1% compared to 12.7% in metropolitan counties.

#### *Location, Facilities and Resources*

Kozol (1995) summarizes the disparity in funding in many states when he stated that depending where the child lives the minimum spent on him could be as low as \$1,500 or as high as \$15,000. The inequity is demonstrated in the facilities, quality of teachers, instructional materials, distribution of resource positions such as counselors, social workers, and custodians, as well as in the distribution of basic supplies such as toilet paper. Inequity in school funding leads to inadequate school facilities. According to a report from the United States Department of Education (1998), the physical building conditions have a definite impact on students. Peeling paint, crumbling plaster, non-functioning toilets, poor lighting, inadequate ventilation and inoperative heating and cooling systems affect the morale of students and staff, as well as their health. Lower test scores were reported in the District of Columbia due to poor building conditions. Environmental factors such as climate control and acoustics lowered the effective performance of students and teachers. Dilapidated buildings affect the teachers' sense of safety. Despair and frustration are evident when leaking roofs and burned out lights are not fixed. Overcrowded conditions affect students ability to concentrate and limit the amount of time teachers can spend on innovative teaching methods. Many teachers struggle constantly to maintain order in their overcrowded classrooms.

In some instances, as the literature shows, providing more money for schools does not produce the desired results. Sixteen elementary schools in East Austin, Texas were given \$300,000 each in addition to normal school spending. A court case ordered this money as part of a resolution to a desegregation case. Five years later, 14 out of the 16 schools reported that student attendance and school achievement remained low. The article states that the fourteen schools used their

money for reducing class size, but did not improve what was happening in the classrooms. The other two schools used their money for staff development, incentives for teachers who improved their teaching, and established clear goals. This may have made the difference in the two schools which actually increased test scores and student attendance (Murnane & Levy, 1996).

#### *Summary of the Literature Review*

The purpose of this literature review was to provide a basis for the comparison of schools within Robeson County. Based on the literature, the authors were not surprised to find that inequity and inequality exists in all areas of the United States. Disparity exists between states, within states, and within school districts. The wealthier school districts can pay more and they also expect more.

#### **Characteristics of Robeson County/School District**

Robeson county population comprises 40,500 Native Americans, 37,800 Whites, 26,000 African Americans, 704 Hispanics, and 239 Asians (United States Bureau of the Census, 1994). There are clear lines of demarcation between wealthy and poor neighborhoods in the county/district which is designated as low wealth according to the state-aid school finance formula, in that the personal income per capita of \$14,024 is below the state figure of \$18,679, and about 30% of the population live in poverty. Local education agencies are eligible for low wealth supplements from the state if the county wealth is less than 100% of the state average wealth (North Carolina Public School Allotment Manual, 1996). In the 1995-96 tax year the county had a property tax rate of .99 per \$100 assessed property value which lowered to .82 after numerous complaints (personal communication, July 24, 1998). The county has a reputation for violent crimes, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence. In 1996, 8,914 juveniles were arrested for these crimes (State Bureau of Investigation, 1996). This is significant in the light of the fact that 97% of youths in the county attended the local public schools.

#### *Ruralism in Robeson County/School District*

Initially, there were six school districts in Robeson County, five so called city districts and one county district as follows: Maxton City- poor; St. Pauls City- rich; Fairmont City- poor; Red Springs City- poor; Fairmont City- poor and Robeson County- rural and mostly poor. These city districts were small and rural by most city standards, and within Robeson County itself there were pockets of high wealth. Hence, many intra-district inequities are mirrored in the combined Robeson county school district such that the single school district carries the divisions with which it began in 1989. No real effort has been made to create a cohesive whole so the inter-district inequities became intra-district divisions and a single per pupil expenditure amount designed for a homogenous county cannot meet the needs of the areas that were behind in the first place.

As was mentioned earlier, Robeson County is one of five school districts currently involved in an equity lawsuit in the state superior court where the plaintiff alleged that the state has not provided adequate funding for low wealth or low capacity counties to attain the minimum foundation level of education required by the state despite adjustments to state-aid formula for low wealth counties. The case also includes five plaintiff intervenors, high capacity counties, who allege that the high cost of urban areas within their district has not been taken into account by the state-aid formula. So it is clear

that the issue of intra-district inequity and inadequacy is prevalent in North Carolina. (*Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, 1997)

#### *The Issue of Race in Robeson County/District*

Robeson County/District is one of 100 school county/districts in North Carolina and one of 119 school districts which include 19 city districts. The 41 schools (33 elementary) have an average daily membership of 23,337 students with approximately 18% in exceptional children's program. The state's percent is 18.6 of state average daily membership of 1,208,047. The racial/ethnic breakdown of students is given in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.**  
**The Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students in Robeson County School District and North Carolina, 1997-98**

| <b>Race</b>      | <b>Robeson County</b> | <b>NC</b> |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Native American  | 44%                   | 1.5%      |
| African American | 31                    | 30        |
| White            | 23                    | 65        |
| Hispanic         | 1.2                   | 1.6       |
| Asian American   | 0.3                   | 1.2       |
| Multiracial      | 0.1                   | -         |

Robeson county school district has the largest proportion of Native American students in the state. (NC Statistical Profile, 1996, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996).

Race has a prominent place in Robeson County/District. Since the merger of the school districts there has been an attempt to have a balanced racial makeup in personnel in keeping with that of the student body. At every school board meeting, the board members receive a "Racial Summary" in their agenda packets to consider as decisions on personnel and other matters are made. One such summary of the racial composition of employees at each school is given in Table 2 (Biank, 1997):

**Table 2.**  
**Racial/Ethnic Composition of Certified Personnel, 1997-98 School Year**

| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| White                 | 794           | 52%            |
| Native American       | 454           | 30             |
| African American      | 266           | 17             |
| Other                 | 13            | 0.9            |

*Statistics provided by Public Relations Department of Robeson County*

As seen in the tables, 44 percent of the student body is comprised of Native Americans, but only 30 percent of teachers are Native American. The same is true of African-American students (31%) and teachers (17%).

During an interview with a high school counselor, she stated that about 70% of the white students at the school had been accepted to college in the 1997-98 school year. Only 40% of the Native American students and 23% of the black students had been accepted. Of these

students, it is predicted that about 85% of the white students will graduate from college, but only 60% of the Native Americans and 45% of the black students will graduate with a four-year degree (personal communication, July 20, 1998).

Although the racial makeup of dropouts for the 1997-98 school year was not available, the dropout rate was 4.5% while the absentee rate was 5.3% in the high schools. A line item in the budget states that \$22,0000 is allotted for Project Graduation. There is none listed for dropout prevention.

#### *Poverty*

Poverty is no stranger to Robeson County. The residents in this area have a per capita income of \$14,000 and a poverty level of 24% (School District Data Book, 1989). The population also reflects great diversity in socioeconomic situations with 40% of households earning less than \$15,000, 21% earning between \$15,000 and \$35,000, while only 3% earned \$75,00 or more in 1989. (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Seventy percent of the students are in the free or reduced lunch program which qualifies Robeson County/District as a Title I county/district.

#### *Facilities and Supplies*

In a recent turn of events in Robeson County/District, a consulting firm was hired to conduct a four-month study of population trends, school structuring and school building conditions in the county. The report from the firm stated that the schools are in the poorest shape of any they had ever seen. An official with the firm stated that middle schools and elementary schools buildings were inadequate. He recommended that four schools should be closed due to their poor condition and replacements should be constructed. The firm also recommended that schools should have a uniform grade level structure: kindergarten through fifth for elementary level, sixth through eighth for middle schools, and ninth through twelfth for high schools. The county/district received \$64 million from a state \$1.8 billion school bond referendum to help with reconstruction but new construction could cost more than \$239 million (Biank, April 11, 1997).

Teachers in the district complained that they almost ran out of toilet paper, supplies were limited in some schools, and little money was given for desperately needed repairs. Many classrooms have an extra trash container to hold water from leaking roofs when it rains. There are school auditoriums dating back to the 1930s and the gymnasium in some of the schools are in dire need of replacement while playground equipment is falling apart, in fact, some of the exposed metal could be considered dangerous. There are schools such as Janie Hargrave, which houses some of the county's behaviorally/emotionally handicapped. The building was so dilapidated that it appeared to be an abandoned school as the paint was peeling off the outside and inside walls. It was dark, dirty and dingy. Southside Ashpole Elementary, a school in the town of Rowland which was built in the 1930's is also one of the most depressing schools in the district. The ceiling is virtually falling down in the gym, the classroom walls are patched with plaster, and the floors are covered with several different colors of tiles, some old, some new. The building actually looks like it is self-destructing. Over 300 students attend this school. They come from rural setting where most of their parents farm the land. The wealthier parents send their children a few miles across the North Carolina state line to Avalon Academy.

On the other hand there are schools in the county/district with new buildings and modern architecture with landscaped lawns and inviting playgrounds. Teachers have the necessary supplies, textbooks and other materials that they need at Tanglewood, Pembroke Elementary and East Robeson Elementary Schools.

#### *Money as an Issue in Robeson County*

This past year the school superintendent was relieved of his post because of misuse of funds; consequently, a new policy was put in place to let the public know where the money is going. For many years, a list of expenditures was given as the budget. Last year, a seven-page list was given to the Board and the public while this year, a 24-page budget was made available to anyone who requested it. Improvements are being made in accountability. The county spends 19% of its budget on education, while spending 47% on human services. (North Carolina Association of County Commissioners). It ranks 12th in the state for per pupil funds provided by the federal government. The county/district is ranked 85th in per pupil capital outlay for a five year average and 110 in per pupil appropriations and supplemental taxes. Specific data for elementary schools were not available but will be examined as the study progresses.

#### *Academics*

In 1994, 62% of instructional personnel held a bachelor's degree and approximately half had a masters degree while 7.8% were classroom teachers with no prior experience- this was similar to the situation in several other districts. Robeson County/District has a poor reputation in the community for low academic achievement in the past. Biank (August, 1997) points out that year after year the Robeson county school system has ranked near the bottom in the state standardized tests. When the ABCs plan began, the schools scored poorly on the third and fourth grade assessments- approximately 12 percent of such schools in the state. Fifteen out of 29 low-performing North Carolina schools were located in Robeson county. The county/district ranked 114/118 in math and 116/118 in reading for 3rd and 4th graders. The high school test scores were not much better: Algebra I, 19.1% proficiency rate, Biology, 16.9%, History, 15.2%, English I, 27.7%, Legal and Political Systems, 21.3% (Biank, 1997).

Assistance teams were assigned by the state board of education to Rex-Rennert Elementary School and Petersen Middle School, the schools with the lowest scores. The assistance team recommended that two teachers from Rex-Rennert be dismissed by the NC Department of Instruction. The local school board rehired these two teachers on a probationary status (Fulton, 1998). The test scores showed large differences among schools in the county. For example, only 1.2 percent of fourth graders at Tanglewood Elementary (in a high wealth neighborhood) school failed to achieve at a basic mathematics level, and 5.4 percent in third grade reading failed to achieve at the basic reading level, compared with 30.3 percent in fourth grade mathematics at Fairgrove Elementary school and 44 .2 in third grade reading at Magnolia school (in a low wealth neighborhood) (Biank, 1997).

#### **The Promise of Reform**

Robeson County/District is considered to be a low performing school district which is seen in the results of the first year, 1996-97, of the ABCs plan. By 1997-98 school year with additional funds provided by the state the county results improved- 18 schools were rated as exemplary, 8 schools were proficient, 6 received no rating while 2

were low performing. The educators in Robeson county focused on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and emphasized coaching for slower students. (Corbin, 1998, Quality Counts, 1997). The following table provides a picture of the elementary schools that were cited as exemplary in 1997-98 after the ABCs intervention plan was applied and more money was allocated to the county specifically for the intervention strategies.

**Table 4.**  
**Description of Elementary Schools Cited by ABCs Plan as Exemplary in 1997-98**

| <b>School</b> | <b>Description</b> | <b>School</b>  | <b>Description</b> |
|---------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Deep Branch   | poor, rural        | Rosenwald      | poor, rural        |
| East Robeson  | poor, rural        | St Pauls       | rich, city         |
| Fairgrove     | poor, rural        | Tanglewood     | rich, city         |
| Green Grove   | poor, rural        | Union          | poor, rural        |
| Oxendine      | poor, rural        | West Lumberton | poor, rural        |
| Piney Grove   | poor, rural        |                |                    |

As a result of the findings in the first ABCs report on the county, performance improved in FY97/98. In 1996-97, \$4,755,075 was appropriated to Robeson County/District by the state board of education, while for FY 1998-99, \$25,105,073 was allotted for the school system, a difference of over \$21,000,000 since FY96/97 (Capital Outlay Budget for Robeson County). Several schools were refurbished with new floors and with some carpeting, walls were painted and new doors were installed. One item that will definitely improve in the 1998/99 school year will be supplies.

There is a \$350,000 increase for classroom supplies in this year's budget. The money will be given to schools according to enrollment. The limited amount of supplies was a major concern of both parents and teachers. In FY98-99, money has been allotted for roof replacement in seven county schools and \$750,000 has been set aside for major repairs and renovations. Some money has been allotted to construction- \$14,852,784 for new and \$25,000 for removal of old buildings. Asbestos demolition was given \$60,000 and new school furniture and equipment will be purchased with \$225,000.

The combination of the additional state funds with Title I money used for low-achieving schools seemed to have had a synergistic effect on outcomes of the second year of testing for the ABCs plan. In the 97-98 school year, the emphasis in the curriculum was placed on reading, writing and mathematics. The educators in Robeson County/District focused on the Standard Course of Study, coaching slower students and teaching for the test (Corbin, 1998).

Although equality has not been completely realized in academics as exemplary still is two levels below excellent in the ABCs scale of achievement, the county seems to be headed in the right direction. The new budget reflects the new times in Robeson County/District and can be seen as a major improvement toward equity in the county. With the line-item budget, no one has to guess what to do with the money. Improvements are being made in accountability.

## Summary/Conclusion

According to members of the community (results of a preliminary telephone opinion poll conducted by the authors), the school system in Robeson county is operating at an average level in provision of instruction, materials, and in maintenance of school buildings. The problems that have been mentioned in general and in particular in Robeson County/District will not be solved through accountability measures unless these policies are backed by adequate funding and supported by other policies aimed at alleviating discrepancies that currently prevent all the schools in the county/district from playing from a level field.

The public schools of Robeson County/District have been plagued for years by problems too numerous to mention here. Some of the major problems were inherited from when there were six school districts in the county. Inequity exists from when the city schools were given generous amounts of money to construct new buildings while the county schools were often neglected. The property value in the county was low; many parents were sharecroppers and did the best that they could by just being able to send their children to school.

Until 1996, it seemed as though the North Carolina state board of education allocated only the minimal amount of money to Robeson county to keep the school door open. Since 1994, when the equity lawsuit was filed, there have been changes in the funding for low wealth school districts, i.e., Robeson county has already seen positive results from the lawsuit. The academic history of Robeson county is a sore subject. Thousands of high school graduates in this county cannot read on a third grade level. The ABCs plan is one way to guarantee that this is not repeated. One full year's growth for one year of school is now the requirement for regular education students. While preliminary evidence of new funding shows real promise, the long-term impact remains to be seen.

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